

## *A Critique of "Place" through Field Museum's Pacific Exhibits*

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### ENTRANCE

A Iatmul ceremonial housefront from Papua New Guinea's Sepik River region is re-created as part of the exhibit hall, "Pacific Spirits," in Chicago's Field Museum of Natural History. A small, darkened window in the housefront alcove attracts visitors. Kids race to the window and peer in on tiptoe. But they can't see into the house. Instead, inside the window a changing image of two masks appears. Kids run off to the next exhibit.

Some adults read the labels that describe the symbolism of the house. They discover that the alcove windows would have held enemy skulls. No skulls are exhibited, they read, out of respect for the sacredness of this aspect of Iatmul culture. They learn that the ceremonial house "embodied the life force of a Iatmul village. And while the house was said to symbolize the first woman—its front her breasts, the gable mask her face, its inside her belly—the Iatmul considered some of its parts, like the house posts and roof finial, to be 'male' " (Field Museum 1990).

This kind of analysis has been the anthropologist's stock in trade. Iatmul beliefs were assumed to be "embodied" or essentialized in the design and meaning of their ceremonial houses. This is not to say that anthropologists have regarded the relationship between indigenous beliefs, intentions, and the built form of a ceremonial house as straightforward. What did living inside something that was mostly female mean to fierce Iatmul men?

The cultural analysis that flowed from this sort of question was sometimes, as Gregory Bateson's was in the 1930s, intriguing and provocative,

despite limiting assumptions about essences and the unproblematic production of symbolic space. In the Iatmul case, Bateson described the house as symbolizing men's pride in head-hunting. He noted that Iatmul men "think of the ceremonial house as 'hot', imbued with heat by the violence and killing which were necessary for its consecration" (Bateson 1958, 124).

But this heat and passion are not evident in Field Museum's display.<sup>1</sup> The built form is simply the housefront, and the housefront is smaller than life. A "real" Iatmul house would never fit in Field Museum's display space.<sup>2</sup> The small scale of the re-created housefront reminds the visitor that this representation stands for, but is not, the real thing.

Nor do heat and passion fill many contemporary analyses of built form or, more broadly, of place. I will argue that a traditional dwelling seldom is recognized as a "living house" (Waterson 1990) or a "moving house" (Rodman 1985) that produces and expresses larger cultural contexts in complex, dynamic ways. Rarely is place problematized. By and large, vernacular built forms have been treated as tablets on which culture seems to be written. Specialists in the study of traditional dwellings have tended to see them as direct expressions of "culture" passed down from one generation of common folk to the next (Bourdier and Alsayyad 1989; Oliver 1987). Even anthropologists interested in the study of place have dismissed ethnographic places as settings, backdrops, and locales. Like museum displays, places have been assumed to be spaces that scholars, not local people, define (see *Cultural Anthropology* theme issue, 1988). As in the museum world, it is time to question this assumption in the study of place.

In a companion piece to this article (Rodman 1992), I have criticized the use of place to mean simply locale and suggested how anthropologists might "empower" place conceptually, building on recent work by geographers as well as by scholars within our own discipline. I have tried to draw attention to how the places anthropologists study are socially constructed. The agency of individuals and of forces beyond individual control are crucial to consider if one wants to understand the socially constructed meaning of space. Places have multiple meanings that arise from their physical form, from people's emotions and experience, from power relations, from the passage of time, and from the times in which they exist. The ways that multiple meanings link and juxtapose multiple places is one aspect of what I have called multilocality (following Marcus 1989). In this article, rather than adopt a conventional point of view, I follow a multilocal approach. I use multiple sites to shake up assumptions, espe-

cially representational ones, about the study of place. In the process, I hope also to shake a few assumptions about museum displays of contemporary Pacific peoples. The social construction of knowledge in museum exhibits, which I will touch on, has received much deserved attention (eg, Karp and Lavine 1991; Stocking 1985). I hope this essay will encourage similar attention to the social construction of museum space.

The article ends with a discussion of irony, but it may be helpful to point out that the whole article is itself ironic. The double meaning at issue concerns the study of place, especially built form, on the one hand, and Field Museum, especially the Pacific exhibits, on the other. I have not attempted to splice together the two strands. Instead, each is intended to comment on the other in a fragmentary way.

The article is organized around three experiences I had at Field Museum in April 1991 while attending a seminar on another topic, which was the future of regional Melanesian (southwest Pacific) studies. These experiences serve as sites—or sights—on a museum tour that considers the place of place in contemporary anthropology and some implicit problems of representation. This museum tour is an experimental narrative journey. It is a journey with turns, twists, and hopefully, discoveries. There are signposts along the way, but no conventional introduction and conclusions, only an entrance and an exit. Thoughts on Iatmul ceremonial houses, a Tahitian marketplace, and a Maori meeting house offer a critique of the study of place that, I hope, is enlivening. This paper is meant to be provocative. It stops short of outlining an alternative approach to the study of place in any detail, for I have attempted that elsewhere (Rodman 1992 and 1987, ch 3). My starting point is to assume that the places we study as anthropologists, as well as those we live in as citizens, are shifting social landscapes that are often contested and always constructed.

### IATMUL HOUSES, CANOES, AND WOMEN: SOCIAL LANDSCAPES

Near the Iatmul housefront in the "Pacific Spirits" exhibit are two black-and-white photographs (circa 1930) from Bateson's collection. One shows a ceremonial house more than 100 feet long with high sweeping gables at each end. It faces an expansive clearing, a dance ground where the bodies of enemy dead would have been displayed. A second photograph shows the same ceremonial house surrounded by water. It seems to float in the lake of what we know from the other photo to be the dance ground.



The Iatmul housefront in Field Museum's "Pacific Spirits" exhibit is smaller than the "real" thing. (*Margaret C. Rodman*)

Labels tell us that the Iatmul ceremonial house symbolized a woman in the dry season, but when the rains came people "spoke of the house as a floating island or canoe, and even tied the house to a nearby tree, as though mooring it to a post" (Field Museum 1990).

The photographs place the re-created housefront in a landscape. They speak in a "poetics of detachment" (Kirshenblatt-Gimblet 1991, 388), in situ yet out of place, commenting on the ethnographic fragment re-created as a housefront and constituting ethnographic fragments themselves. They remind the visitor that even a ceremonial house exists in a physical world, one alien to Chicago yet as subject to dramatic seasonality.<sup>3</sup> The contrast between the photographs sets up a play of representations in which ambiguity is central.

As other displays in the exhibit point out, boundaries between land and water are unclear. Much of the region is often the consistency of tepid porridge, not quite land, but too thick to be water. Yet the contrast between the two photographs could hardly be greater. The visitor can *see* that the built form is like a canoe in the wet season and clearly a house when the land is dry. Perhaps because we do not expect a house to become a canoe, the juxtaposed photos are stunning. The labels encourage the viewer to contrast the images while affirming their ambiguous meaning: the house can be "a canoe, a floating island or a dancing woman" (Field Museum



1990). The viewer is encouraged to enter what Michael Baxandall refers to as the space between the object and the label (1991, 37–38), an intellectual space in which the viewer becomes an active agent in a three-way relationship between the maker, exhibitor, and viewer of an artifact. But, as the Iatmul example shows, this relationship can be even more complex when the viewer's interpretive process is multilocal. One creates spaces between multiple objects and labels as one moves between the two photographs, the re-created housefront, and their various labels. Yet in a sense those socially created spaces are entirely between the visitor and different facsimiles—the diminutive housefront, the photographs, the text—and the only agents are the viewers and exhibitors.

It was not always so. The Iatmul house itself was a nexus bringing together what the photos, labels, and the seasons divide. It was not an easily separated overlay of canoe, island, man, woman. The house could express socially constructed meanings that representations of it—in text or image, in two or three dimensions—only glimpse. The photographs at least hint at ways in which canoes and humans, land and water can be tangled or stirred, inseparably mixed. House form and place, culture and landscape are not oppositional categories here. Instead, each dynamically partakes of, shapes, and “is” the others in processes that individually and collectively attempt to control and produce expressive space.<sup>4</sup>

Geographers and anthropologists are only beginning to accept such a contested, constructed blending of culture and nature, substance and form, despite critiques that date back at least half a century. Considerable attention has been paid to exploring how meaning, capital accumulation, and space interact, and how the social production of place reciprocally shapes individuals and society.<sup>5</sup>

But disciplinary separations still make a distinction between built form and culture seem natural. Architects, for example, may season their work with a cultural perspective: cultural considerations are nice if they are available, but they are not essential or intrinsic to conventional architectural training. If it is seen as a symbolized system of meaning, culture is separable from the principles of modern building construction. Cultural considerations, then, become important when introducing Western architecture into a Third World setting. This should make us realize the extent to which our own architecture is a cultural product. More often, however, it emphasizes the cultural peculiarities of the recipients of our exported built forms.

For ethnographers in social anthropology, as Denise Lawrence and Seta Low note in their review article on spatial form and the built environment (1990, 457), culture has been the main concern; built form has played a "relatively passive role." Culture provided the material context or framework within which to analyze household relations and symbolic orders. As such, descriptions of the built environment and its construction often were published separately from monographs in the 1940s and 1950s. But some influential studies placed built form in the foreground. Bourdieu (1977), Glassie (1975), Roderick Lawrence (1982; 1987), and Rapoport (1969) are examples of studies that approached the relationship between culture and built form through vernacular architecture, objects, spaces, and zones. They emphasized the importance of cultural and social practice. Their analyses started with material forms as a way of getting at the less tangible habits, beliefs, categories, and so on that order houses and other buildings.

Where built form has played a role in anthropology, it has been as a material dimension reflective of, but separate from, culture defined as a system of meaning. Where culture has played a role in architecture, it has been as a consideration that modifies seemingly objective built form. Built form and culture, in a word, have been regarded as separate. This assumption, I suggest, is wrong.

The idea that there is a relationship between "culture" and "built form" is the heart of the problem. Only if there is a conceptual separation between the two can such a relationship be said to exist in the first place. This separation gets in the way of understanding anything that goes beyond or cuts across our own categories. It makes it hard to get what Bateson called "the 'feel' of culture." Like those of us disappointed with the separation of built form and culture today, Bateson reported in a 1940 conference paper that

I was bored with the conventional study of the more formal details [of culture]. I went out to New Guinea with that much vaguely clear—and in one of my first letters home I complained of the hopelessness of putting any sort of salt on the tail of such an imponderable concept as the "feel" of culture. . . . I was not interested in achieving a literary or artistic representation of the "feel" of the culture; I was interested in a scientific analysis of it. (Bateson 1972, 81–82)

Some anthropologists in the 1980s devoted much attention to achieving literary representations of the "feel" of culture, or at least of the ethnogra-

pher's experience (eg, Clifford and Marcus 1986). Others (eg, Feld 1983, Howes 1990) have emphasized the importance of getting the feel of a culture through one's senses first. Less progress is evident on the scientific or, one might add, on the political front in ethnographic analysis. But a hopeful sign for the future of anthropology is that the concept of culture is undergoing serious reevaluation. The neat classifications and essentialist reifications of culture are not useful for understanding the contemporary world. Worse, the anthropological concept of culture has obscured the political dimensions of symbolic systems, the differential distribution of knowledge, and other dimensions of power (Keesing 1989). Linnekin notes that anthropological literature in the 1980s went beyond Geertz's definition of culture as a system of meanings "in probing the very process of cultural construction, and particularly in its treatment of human consciousness. . . . In this framework culture is seen as an idea, a model, and a site where meanings are contested" (Linnekin 1991b, 1).

In the anthropological literature, the "sites" where meanings are contested still need to be taken seriously as "places" in ways analogous to the reconsideration of "voice" in recent years. Outside anthropology there is greater acceptance that space is socially constructed in the present (Lawrence and Low 1990). But, ironically, nonanthropologists often fail to see culture as similarly constructed and contested, retaining instead a Geertzian view of culture as a system.

Bateson was more guilty than most of thinking of culture as a system of meanings. But he differed from many of his peers in the *kind* of system he had in mind, for his was a cybernetic system that unified mind and nature such that "mind" could be seen to extend beyond the body. His *Mind and Nature* (1979) was an explicitly post-Cartesian quest for what he called "a necessary unity." I would like briefly to return to his ideas through the Iatmul housefront and photographs. Bateson's ecological approach, I suggest, is consistent with a contemporary idea of the "social landscape." The concept of social landscapes provides a starting point for a broader, more powerful conceptualization of place that dissolves dichotomies of built form and culture.

The Iatmul photographs and housefront are exhibited as representations. The dry season image, the wet season image, and the image presented by the re-created housefront are all representations of the same "thing" from different perspectives. But to the Iatmul whose life force these houses were said to embody, each image would have been part of a

lived world. The concepts of a lifeworld and of *l'espace vécu* 'lived space' are phenomenological, emphasizing individuals' experience in the world. But a "social landscape" takes a broader view of time and space. The concept, as developed by Pacific archaeologist Chris Gosden (1989; 1991), links the archaeological record to the ways social groups interact with landscapes that are partly structured by previous social groups. The social landscape is both context and content, enacted and material. It is the lived world in physical form. The concept of social landscape fits well with geographers' renewed interest in reunifying *location* (ie, the spatial distribution of socioeconomic activity), *sense of place* (or attachment to place), and *locale* (the setting in which social activity occurs) to yield a more complex understanding of places as culturally and socially constructed in practice (Agnew and Duncan 1989, 2).

The assumption behind the idea of social landscapes is quite different from that which would separate built form and culture. But the social landscape concept is consistent with the Iatmul worldview, as Bateson describes it, and with Bateson's own view of the way the world works. For the Iatmul, order is the nature of things unless humans, or others, keep things stirred up. Bateson contrasts the Biblical view of creation, as an imposition of divine order on natural chaos, with the Iatmul creation myth in which a crocodile impedes the natural tendency of the world toward order:

Among the Iatmul of New Guinea, the central origin myth, like the Genesis story, deals with the question of how dry land was separated from water. They say that in the beginning the crocodile Kavwokmali paddled with his front legs and his hind legs; and his paddling kept the mud suspended in the water. The great culture hero Kevembuangga, came with his spear and killed Kavwokmali. After that the mud settled and dry land was formed. (Bateson 1972, xxiv)

Bateson overlooks the similarities between gods. The God of Genesis and Kevembuangga both in their own ways create separations. But his point about the crocodile leads us back to the Papuan mud with its strain toward order. Sometimes the mud is left alone to become water, in which houses seem to float like canoes, or to become land on which houses lie down like women. This is a world in suspension. Humans create a social landscape here that literally settles.

The idea of a social landscape in an integrated world of mind and nature suggests an alternative way of thinking about what we have called

built form and culture, an alternative that would be based on an integrated notion of place. Like the contrast between the re-created house-front and the two Iatmul photographs, the concept of a social landscape emphasizes the importance of context. The house is not set apart from the physical world in Bateson's photographs. Indeed, the house floats or stands in it. Nor is it set apart from the social world. The heat with which Iatmul men think of their house, its niches for the skulls of ancestors, its dance ground for the bodies of the enemy, all make it a living part of the landscape.

### TAHITI AND CAIRO: REPRESENTATION'S TWO-SIDED STREET

The Iatmul house in Field Museum can stand for a woman or a canoe or a love of taking heads in battle. But, ultimately, to most museum visitors a house is "really" just a house. In this section of the paper I argue that to assume that there are meanings *behind* things is like assuming that culture and built form, subject and object, or mind and body are separate. I critique this aspect of representation by looking at the Tahitian marketplace in another Pacific gallery at Field Museum. I conclude the section by suggesting that those whose goal is "evocation," sometimes seen as a solution to the problem of representation, should take into account questions of power.

In a historical study published in 1988, Timothy Mitchell explores the world-as-exhibition that emerged in Europe during the nineteenth century. He argues that European notions of representation and reality elaborated a well-established distinction between objects and what they mean that still preoccupies us.

Mitchell begins with the accounts of Egyptian visitors to the 1889 World Exhibition in Paris (1988, ix). Scholars on their way to a conference of Orientalists in Stockholm, they were horrified by the re-creation of a Cairo street at the exhibition.<sup>6</sup> The carefully re-created squalor of the Cairo street compared poorly, they thought, with the adjacent images of European capitalism. Cultural anomalies also offended them; the façade of a mosque, for example, housed a coffee shop. "The facades, the onlookers and the degradation seemed all to belong to the organising of an exhibit, to a particularly European concern with rendering things up to be viewed" (Mitchell 1988, 2).

A Tahitian marketplace is the final destination in "Traveling the

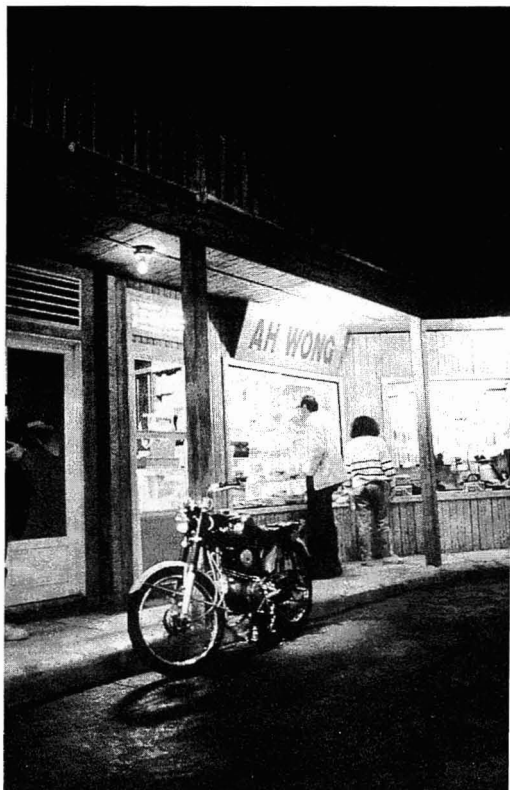


A Chinese store in the Tahitian marketplace exhibit in "Traveling the Pacific," Field Museum of Natural History. (*Margaret C. Rodman*)

Pacific" a new exhibit at Field Museum in Chicago. Like the Cairo street that offended Egyptians a century ago, the Tahitian marketplace is down at the heels. Gutters are rusty, sidewalks are cracked. A decrepit motorcycle parked on the street revs up and backfires every few minutes. It is the main attraction for children who head straight for the bike and hop on it as if it were a bouncing ride outside a supermarket. For adults, the built form is supposed to work by "evoking one time and place in the evolution of people and cultures across the Pacific" (Hoke 1989, 28).

Upon entering the space, visitors are first confronted by the towering structure of a tin-roofed marketplace. Wandering through the arcades, there are stalls displaying meats, local fish, ancient Polynesian food crops, along with Chinese and European vegetables. . . . Across the street is a row of shops that reflects some of the French colonial influence, with covered walkways and decorative railings.

Walking under the balcony, visitors first pass the window of a boutique, with displays of colorful imported fabrics with "tropical" designs. . . . Next door to the fabric store, you can peep into a general store stuffed with French,



A motorcycle revs up and backfires every few minutes in the Tahitian marketplace exhibit in "Traveling the Pacific," Field Museum of Natural History. (*Margaret C. Rodman*)

Chinese, and Tahitian items. . . . The shopkeeper's radio blares out a beat of rock music with a Tahitian touch. Passing down the sidewalk, you can look into the window of a tackle shop to see a display of fishing gear used to catch local sea life. At the end of the block is a Chinese pharmacy. (Hoke 1989, 26)

Like the Paris Exhibition of 1889, this one too is a product of its time. It is a postmodern pastiche of plastic fishing lures made in Japan, pareu cloth from Polynesia, fake food, and material (sewer pipes, a motorcycle) scavenged from Chicago dumps. The whole exhibit of which the marketplace is part juxtaposes times, places, and people without explanation. Before reaching the Tahitian marketplace, visitors pass a Hawaiian lava flow, cross a Micronesian atoll, learn about Pacific canoes, and see artifacts from the Huon Gulf of Papua New Guinea. A review of the exhibit notes that the marketplace, which is Polynesian, follows a display of Melanesian artifacts that seem to serve as the ancestral culture for the Tahitians. "Design," the reviewer concludes, "has overtaken information" (Kaeppler 1991, 270; see also Pridmore 1991).



One paragraph from the catalog is especially loaded with interesting assumptions about the representation of culture: "Even though the marketplace's contemporary setting did not allow us to include artifacts from the Museum's collections, craft items shown in the market and stores were bought by anthropologist Jones in Tahiti, and as such can be considered contemporary artifacts, whose importance will only increase with time" (Hoke 1989, 28).

Even if one assumes that museum artifacts relate to earlier periods and, on that basis, were excluded from a contemporary exhibit, interesting questions of agency in museum politics remain. After all, somebody in the same museum that holds the "Museum's collection" decided in favor of a contemporary setting that does not "allow" the display of artifacts. What circumstances would make museum personnel develop an exhibit that would "not allow" them to display any of the artifacts that were the museum's *raison d'être*? The demise of curatorial control over exhibits and the rise of marketing considerations seem likely explanations.<sup>7</sup>

But, the catalog assures us, "craft items" substitute for artifacts. It presents two kinds of evidence for this. First, the authenticity of the crafts as artifacts is demonstrated by the fact an anthropologist (Laura Jones, apparently no relation to Indiana) bought them in Tahiti. Her acquisition of the items for the museum seems to have transformed them from mundane items into artifacts. Without this magic touch, mass-produced knives, tinned fish, and Spandex bathing suits would hardly be "crafts," much less museum-quality artifacts of contemporary culture. Consumption and collection have become interchangeable.<sup>8</sup> Not only can visitors admire what the anthropologist bought, they can interact with the exhibit as if they were making their own purchases. "Museum visitors can try on a traditional Tahitian pareu . . . [and] peep into a general store."

Second, the "crafts" will *become* artifacts simply by remaining part of the exhibit for the foreseeable future. "Traveling the Pacific" is not a traveling show. The catalog notes that the "real" Tahitian marketplace that inspired the exhibit no longer exists: "Our Marketplace at the Museum is already a reminder of the constantly changing world we live in, a measure of the past" (Hoke 1989, 28). The assumption of a "disappearing world" from which it was the West's duty to collect representative specimens seems in no danger of disappearing at Field Museum. In the visual technology of natural history museums, Donna Haraway has observed (1989, 41-54), memory is an art of reproduction that denies the passage of time

and threat of decay found in ordinary life. The credo of realism required that specimens sought for museums in the heyday of Haraway's "Teddy Bear Patriarchy" be perfect. But, in a late twentieth century inversion, the Tahitian marketplace seems "realistic" precisely because it includes imperfections. The technology is so sophisticated that an illusion of decay can be created and controlled. Decay is reproduced and arrested in the fiberglass food and "rusting" drainpipes of the Tahitian marketplace. The exhibit's permanence seems to ensure that what was presented as "a contemporary view of the mix of Tahitian, European, and Asian cultures when the exhibit opened in 1989" (Hoke 1989, 26) will become a timeless, ethnographic present perpetually on the brink of dissipation.

There was considerable opposition to the Tahitian marketplace, and to "Traveling the Pacific" more generally, among the anthropology curators at Field Museum (Terrell 1991a). In a sense, *they* were the Egyptian visitors in this instance. The exhibit horrified them. They played little role in mounting the display, which had a "designer" rather than a curator. For some of the curatorial staff, the Tahitian marketplace stood for much that is wrong in the world of museum anthropology. Their reasons were numerous. They regarded the exhibit as wasted space in which artifacts could otherwise have been displayed. They thought it pandered to a consumer orientation in the museum public. They criticized the exhibit because it failed to include Pacific Islanders in its planning. It depicts Pape'ete, a modern city, as a seedy paradise out of a Somerset Maugham novel. It presents the Pacific in a way that allows Western museum visitors to dismiss the region as a quaint backwater. Field Museum is not overtly an exposition of the accomplishments of business and industry, like the Paris Exhibition of 1889, but the Tahitian marketplace still contrasts with the best and worst of modern life—it is quaint, but it is also composed partly of "artifacts" from Chicago junkyards. In the best tradition of natural history museums, it both "exoticises" and "assimilates" (Karp 1991, 377).

The point of this side trip into the Tahitian marketplace is to show that while museums have become Disneyfied, they have not changed fundamentally from the Paris Exhibition that Mitchell described. Such ethnological exhibits still are seemingly unreflective products of their own time and place. Museum studies may be increasingly self-critical (eg, Karp and Lavine 1991), but museums as institutions have had good reasons for not reflecting too much on the techniques of effecting meanings, or technolo-

gies, in such exhibits, and for not encouraging their visitors to do so either.<sup>9</sup>

The problem, I suggest, is one of place, of where one is speaking from and to whom one is speaking. Anthropologists have tried to speak from the point of view of the people they study and to speak to other members of their own society. They have tended to assume a community of values in both places. By and large, anthropologists still assume the right to define ethnographic places, and museums still assume the right to represent other cultures. They still present the world as an exhibition. Indeed, the extent of appropriation of other cultures is now such that the exhibition-as-world can be traveled. Sally Price's comments about primitive art collecting apply as well to contemporary ethnographic exhibits: "Like its aging parent, colonialism, and its somewhat younger cousins, travel journalism and tourism, Primitive Art collecting is based on the Western principle that 'the world is ours' " (1989, 79). The Cairo street has become a Tahitian marketplace.

The world-as-exhibition provided a motif for Mitchell to explore "the peculiar methods of order and truth that characterize the modern West" (Mitchell 1988, ix). These methods (eg, of enframing and representation) are still evident in "Traveling the Pacific" but the theme, though not the logic, is inverted. It becomes exhibition-as-world. Like theme parks and living history museums, Field Museum of Natural History now offers a place you can travel to without leaving home. Television ads for the exhibition featured a man showing slides of his Pacific "vacation" that turn out to have been taken in the "Traveling the Pacific" exhibit.

The seemingly natural distinction between representation and reality is particularly evident in museum settings, but I have chosen these examples to make us think about the extent to which assumptions about representation have permeated studies of built form and place. Mitchell argues that the colonization of Egypt illustrates the effect that assumptions about the world-as-exhibition can have as disciplinary mechanisms in Foucault's (1975) sense. In effect, many studies of built form and place also impose a "new order" in which space is assumed to be neutral. Space is seen as a thing. It can be divided up, contained, and specified. "Enframing" is what Mitchell (following Heidegger) calls the effect of this order that creates a series of inert frames or containers.

Mitchell offers a re-analysis of Bourdieu's (1977) structuralist interpretation of the Kabyle house. He notes that the Kabyle house differs from

the European notion of enframing space in several crucial ways, one of which I present here because of its implications for my argument.

There is no frame to this vernacular house form: "Its order is not achieved by effecting an inert structure that contains and orders a contents. Not even the roof and sides form such a framework. The pillars, walls, and beams of the house all carry their own charge, so to speak" (Mitchell 1988, 52). Instead of the interlocking central house post and beam "symbolizing" sexual union, as Bourdieu describes, Mitchell argues that "the sexual union and the assembling of the house echo and resemble one another. Neither is a mere symbol of the other" (1988, 52).

The Kabyle house, in Mitchell's view, is a process "caught up" in the lives, births, growths, and deaths of those who dwell in it. It is not a framework apparently inert and seemingly separate from its inhabitants. Similarly, the building process is not one of following a plan; instead, it is an interactive process related, as Bourdieu recognized, to cycles of emptying and filling, abundance and decay. The division of space inside the house and between the house and the outside is contextual and relational. It is based on resemblances and differences, not on codes or symbols separable from the physical world: "Nothing stands apart from what resembles or differs, as the simple, self-identical original, the way a real world is thought to stand outside the exhibition" (Mitchell 1988, 61).

Mitchell's approach is not without flaws. He fails to consider how relative power is contested in the *construction* of spaces, such as the Kabyle house. This is important to the argument later in this paper. But for the moment, accepting Mitchell's critique is useful for what it reveals about representation and Western assumptions. By now it should be apparent why it is difficult to analyze the relationship between built form, culture, and place very powerfully. The origins of these separations lie in a Western, historical acceptance of representation and, more fundamentally, of distinctions between subjects and objects. Structuralists are not the only ones guilty of trying to pin down meanings presumed to stand apart from, and behind, the "real" world of objects. Distinctions between spectacle and spectator, original and copy, object and meaning, material and symbolic, exterior and interior still permeate many assumptions, held by ordinary people as well as academics, about the way the world works.<sup>10</sup> What I am suggesting is that, in the study of place, we must recognize the limitations of these assumptions.

The Tahitian marketplace and the re-created Iatmul housefront cer-

tainly stand apart from what is defined as the "real" world. They are built forms that are made to stand for (and apart from) the cultures they depict. But representation as a mechanism of order is not easily dismissed. We must still attend, on the one hand, to the power of such built forms to evoke placeless places, and, on the other, to the importance of returning power to the places and people we have vainly represented.

Mitchell made much of the Egyptians' reactions to the Cairo street at the Paris Exhibition of 1889. What did Pacific Islanders think of "Traveling the Pacific"? The curator of the Papua New Guinea National Museum was uneasy before he ever saw the exhibit. He was at Field Museum for the seminar in which I was also a participant in April 1991. He knew how much some of the curators objected to the gallery, especially to the Tahitian marketplace. He also knew that other staff at Field, some more powerful than the curators, were very proud of the exhibit. One of them was taking him to dinner that Friday night. Like the Egyptian Orientalists in Paris, this visitor knew that he was expected to give a response that would represent his people. He was supposed to stand for all Pacific Islanders just as the re-created atoll in the exhibit was supposed to stand for Pacific paradise islands. He did not like this role.

On Friday afternoon, the visiting curator said he finally had to see the controversial marketplace. His dinner with the high-ranking administrator was only hours away. We walked through the exhibit together. His reaction surprised me, and puzzled me for weeks after the seminar ended. He liked the marketplace. "You've got to admit," he said to me, "there are places in the Pacific just like this." Just then, John Terrell, curator of Oceanic Archaeology and Ethnology at Field Museum, arrived. He was full of curiosity about the Pacific Islander's reaction and seemingly concerned to be sure his own view of the marketplace as a travesty was clearly understood. He commented to me later, in response to reading a draft of this paper, "At the time, I realized that it is terribly difficult to explain and be heard on this issue. Much of the discourse is about power and responsibility" (Terrell, pers comm, 1991).

Listening to the two men discuss the exhibit, I heard differences in their responses. For the Field Museum curator, the exhibit seemed *representational*. Its built form stood for many things, including elements of power and responsibility. The Papua New Guinean curator may have decided not to see it that way. Intentionally or not, his response let him pass

unscathed through a museum politics minefield. For him the marketplace was *evocative*. It conveyed a sense of place that was placeless. It did not evoke, as the museum catalog promised, "one time and place in the evolution of peoples and cultures across the Pacific" (Hoke 1989, 28). Instead, the marketplace evoked qualities that many Pacific Island towns share. There are, indeed, countless places in the Pacific "just like it." The play of resemblance and difference begins easily. You need only have seen one such town to say "It reminds me a lot of ———." Like tourists traveling the real world, we stood in the Tahitian marketplace remembering other South Pacific towns with Chinese stores and peeling paint.

In other words, recognizing the order that seeing the world as an exhibition imposes on ourselves and others is not enough. Evocation "is neither presentation nor representation. It presents no objects and represents none, yet makes available through absence what can be conceived but not presented" (Tyler 1987, 199). But it is not, as Tyler claims, "beyond truth." The world of common sense to which evocation returns people is unself-conscious and judgmental. Evocation in which meaning is carried by resemblances and differences can also appropriate places if it dissociates them from their social landscapes.<sup>11</sup> The marketplace that seemed so familiar to us had all the authenticity of Disneyworld's Mainstreet USA, which is to say it had considerable evocative power while begging other questions of power and place. Notably, none of us, three "experts" commenting on the exhibit, was even a Polynesian. And all of us *were* experts—or at least members of an elite—in that we knew enough to see the irony of the exhibit, to catch the joke of displaying a museum-quality model of a rundown marketplace. What about the museum visitors for whom a "typical" Polynesian marketplace would *not* be familiar? If evocation does not draw on experience, what does it implicate? Terrell's worries convey something of the dilemma of elitism and evocation confronting many academic fields but especially evident where scholars meet the public, as in museums today:

[A]s a curator, I believe I have a moral and professional responsibility to worry about the messages we are sending out to our visitors. True, one doesn't even have to be post-modernist to acknowledge that people will make of things what they want to make of them. But my concern is that we give them enough stuff to work with. And so I *can't* just enjoy the marketplace; I have to worry about what it is likely to be calling up in the visitor's mind. You, [the Papua

New Guinean curator], and I can all put this market in context. But someone from the North Shore or the Inner City [of Chicago] may not be able to do so. And that worries me a lot. (Terrell, pers comm, 1991)

This dilemma, of course, is not confined to museums. The incident with the Tahitian marketplace also speaks more generally to the need to raise questions of elitism, evocation, and representation in studying places outside the museum. In a final Field reflection I will consider who should be giving whom "enough stuff to work with." When that stuff consists of built forms evoking places, how can it be connected to a wider social landscape? Finally, what lessons from Field Museum, and from the museum field, might be applied to the anthropological study of built form, culture, and place?

### A MAORI MEETINGHOUSE: POWER, PLACE, AND IRONY

There is a Maori meetinghouse in the basement of Field Museum. The carved house's name is Ruatēpupuke (Rua, who swells up). Built in 1881 to house ancestors from Tokomaru Bay, it now is sheathed in plastic in a cold storage room. The house is the ancestor, Ruatēpupuke, who acquired the art of wood carving from the sea god Tangaroa (Mead 1984, 64–66). In the myth, Ruatēpupuke was looking desperately for his lost son when he came upon a house from which human voices were emanating. He entered and found that the house posts were holding a conversation. They told him that his son had been turned into a gable ornament.

What is a talking house doing in a museum's basement storage room? Maori houses should be kept warm. "Such treasures must be touched, held and loved so that the ancestors, too, are kept warm and cherished by their offspring. From a Maori way of seeing things, therefore, having something Maori locked up in a foreign museum—or pinned up in a museum display—is uncivilized" (Terrell 1991b, 14).

Some Maori want treasures like Ruatēpupuke brought back home. During a 1990 conference in New Zealand on Maori treasures, John Terrell was relieved when a young Maori man raised the question of repatriating artifacts. In contrast to many other museum people, John likes to deal with repatriation head on. He quotes the young Maori speaker as saying, "You have asked what the Maori people want from the museums of the world. . . . We want you to give us our *taonga* [treasures] back"





James L. Ballard

Museum staff and New Zealand visitors pose in front of Ruatepupuke in Field Museum. *Bulletin of Field Museum of Natural History*, November 1987, 25. *Reproduced with permission.*

(Terrell 1991b, 14). Terrell's response was to ask a rhetorical question of the Maori in the audience:

"Do the Maori have anything to teach the world?" I suggested that if they have nothing to teach the world, then it might be appropriate to bring back everything to New Zealand that is now held in overseas museums. "But if you have something to teach the world, please don't bring all your *taonga* home and leave us only with a video tape."

Everyone in the audience, I think, understood what I was saying. First, museums teach people best through the medium of real objects, not with video tapes. Second, they also knew I was saying something else that was important, too. I was acknowledging that the Maori do have things to teach the world. And I was saying that museums are places where they can do the teaching that needs to be done about Maori life and custom, in the past and in the present. (Terrell 1991b, 15)

For Terrell, the Maori meetinghouse in his museum's basement is the focal point for a creative response to calls for repatriation, an approach he calls "cultural theatre." By this he means that museums should become stages for cultural performances, but not performances, like those in the Paris Exhibition, in which power rested with Westerners. Instead, performances organized by native peoples would enable them to teach museum

visitors lessons that native people feel are important, using the museum's collection of their treasures as the "leading actors" (Terrell 1999b, 15). Terrell's emphasis on performance is consistent with a more general recognition that the production of a museum exhibition has much in common with theatrical production. Like a theater audience, museum visitors can feel included or excluded: "Regardless of exhibition content, producers can choose strategies that can make some portion of the public feel either empowered or isolated. If the audience, or some segment thereof, feels alienated, unworthy, or out of place, I contend it is because we want them to feel that way" (Gurian 1991, 177).

But what about the people whose cultures are "produced" for display? They too would seem likely to feel unworthy and alienated if, as Gurian claims, exhibition content and presentation are separable. She is keenly aware of the Western audience's needs but seems to ignore those of the people whose artifacts fill a museum like Field. She points out that for Michael Spock, director of the Boston Children's Museum from 1962 to 1986 who then moved on to Field Museum, "learning was a risky business" because of his own experience with dyslexia (Gurian 1991, 179). Empowering the museum visitor as a learner became Spock's ambition. "The subject matter was not his primary interest—enfranchising the learner was" (Gurian 1991, 179–180). It is not surprising then, that curators felt left out in the production of the "Traveling the Pacific" exhibit. But Spock's emphasis on audience participation could be modified to redress the neglect of "subject matter" and reconstruct the "other" so as to include more active participation of native peoples as producers, including producers of cultural theater, and as visitors.

The process of involving native people in museum exhibitions can be filled with conflict. Canadian examples abound.<sup>12</sup> And the extent to which such exhibits represent contemporary native people's views also is a thorny issue. One way of avoiding the kinds of problems other museums have encountered would be not only to include native people from the beginning but to genuinely share power with them.

For cultural theater to be more than native people performing their differences on stages and with props provided for them by Western museums, power must be shared.<sup>13</sup> This is an implicit recognition of the Eurocentric bias of museums and, perhaps, of our more general tendency to see the world as an exhibition organized by Westerners. The extent to which Maori people experience the world and the place of their treasures in it

differently is evident in the social construction of their meetinghouse as a mingling of living and dead, speech and place. It may also be evident in their response to what they see as anthropologists' attempts to deny the authenticity of their traditions. Maori response to Hanson's (1989) claim that key elements of Maori tradition were Western inventions has been largely negative. Linnekin presents the arguments for and against Hanson's position. She concludes that "anthropologists clearly no longer monopolize the business of defining culture" (Linnekin 1991b, 10; see also 1991a). A cultural construction approach, she suggests, allows for negotiated discourses in which both native peoples and anthropologists can have a voice.

How is the meaning of such a place constructed? Michael Linzey points out that the idea that the Maori house is a living presence "is richer than mere simile; it is beyond the idea of metaphor or representation in a European educated sense. For the Maori, the house is not *like* an ancestor, it *is* the ancestor" (1989, 317).

This, Linzey notes, seems peculiar to people of European background who exclude themselves from the "nourishing possibilities of indigenous architecture" (Linzey 1989, 318). As Bateson put it, if we are to attain a "state of grace," by which he means an "integration of the diverse parts of the mind," we must open ourselves to other ways of knowing about the world, which might well include living houses: "The reasons of the heart must be integrated with the reasons of reason" (Bateson 1972, 129).

I have said that house posts spoke to Ruatēpūke. He also spoke to them. People, in Maori tradition, speak to architecture and it talks back. The dialogue continually constructs and reconstructs the past in the present, linking and separating people through speech and place. The *karanga* (the call), made by a woman addressing the place and the people, is essential before visitors can enter the gates of a *marae*. "Just as the ancestors live on through the house, so the *karanga* provides the medium by which the living and the dead of the [visitors] may cross the physical space to unite with the living and the dead of the [hosts]" (Tauroa and Tauroa 1986, 36).

Linzey's argument is not Heidegger's rewarmed. It is postmodern. He observes that architecture can "speak to us" Westerners, but only metaphorically. We are inhibited, he suggests, by "a kind of intellectual *tapu*" (Linzey 1989, 333) that is responsible for the sense of loss and "lamentation" Westerners often feel about modern architecture. Grand narratives,

in Lyotard's sense, allow Maori to speak to their architecture; other powerful narratives, notably Platonic ones, keep us from speaking to ours (Linzey 1989, 318 ff).

So why is the Maori house not on display?<sup>14</sup> This is another question of power. The house, some museum authorities have said, is too big to display. The issues it raises may also be too big to display in the museum world. Sharing power with the people whose cultures were the source of museum collections is controversial. It is disturbing to find that the "Disappearing World" has not disappeared but rather has come to your doorstep asking for its treasures back. And not everyone on the doorstep wants the same thing. Their voices are polyphonous, like the competing voices within museums (see Vogel 1991). The young Maori man who wanted his people's treasures back does not stand for all Polynesians or even all Maori any more than the Papua New Guinean curator stands for all Pacific Islanders who visit the Tahitian marketplace, or the Field Museum curator stands for all curators.

## EXIT

To summarize, in this paper I have argued that the opposition between built form and culture is largely spurious. Built form and culture are no more separate than body and mind. Their separation, as is especially evident in museum displays of artifacts, is a product of certain Western historical modes of categorization. As museum examples also show, the separation of built form and culture is linked to other separations. I used Timothy Mitchell's phrase, the world-as-exhibition, to indicate how houses and places, among other things, have served as a series of picture-like objects behind which there were assumed to be "real" meanings. As Mitchell's analysis of the Kabyle house suggested, places can be processes "caught up" in the lives lived in and among them. The Maori house, too, is such a process.

We are led to consider alternate ways of constructing place once we accept the *presence* of processes of cultural and personal meaning in social landscapes, including built forms. These include, in fact are predicated on, power relations very different from those on which we have based our research in built form, culture, and place (and social science more generally). Sharing power with—in some cases giving it back to—the people anthropologists have traditionally studied should lead us beyond disciplinary separations and representational assumptions to reevaluate place.

Places in the world of our research are not totalized, essentialized Western creations like the Tahitian marketplace. Yet, so far there is little recognition that place is more than locale, the setting for action, the stage on which things happen. It would be arrogant and naive to assume that places exist only as localizations of totalized academic voices (see Appadurai 1988a; 1988b). As anthropologists, we need to become more aware of our own bias in assuming that "place" means those places *we* (or "metropolitan theory" as Appadurai calls it) define.

In order to return control over the meanings of place to the rightful producers, questions of power and agency need to be reconsidered. "What has to be cancelled," argues Marilyn Strathern (1988, 94), "is the basis of the comparison" so that we no longer privilege our own vantage point and peripheralize all other places. Rather than places becoming exemplars of *our* concepts, we need to see them as socially constructed products of *others'* interests (material as well as ideational) and as mnemonics of *others'* experiences. We need to explore the contests and tensions between different actors and interests in the construction of space (Munn 1990). The Field Museum's Maori house provides an opportunity for such an exploration of the meaning and power of place in a cross-cultural context.

Even in cold storage, Ruatēpupuke, the Maori meetinghouse, commands respect. Terrell took seminar participants to visit it. We had to remove our shoes and wait. He strode to the plastic shroud covering the housefront. He commented that he should be a Maori grandmother to invite us onto the *marae*. Then he turned and called us in Maori. His voice was at once his own, the wail of a grandmother, and the eerie cry of the ancestor whose house it is. Only when called could we cross the cold cement floor and pass through the plastic curtain.

The housefront sparkled with hundreds of eyes. They were made of abalone shell and seemed to glow in the dim light. In the darkness within the house were more eyes. We were encouraged to touch the carved wood walls and house posts, whose intricate designs we could scarcely see. They were part of the ancestors, humans in built form, part of the past and the present. I stroked the head of a wooden ancestor. Terrell said reassuringly that we should not be worried if we felt the hairs on our neck bristle. Even in cold storage the house contained the heat to which Bateson, in another time and place, had alluded in describing the Melanesian Iatmul house. The house was full of power. It, too, was the body of a human—a man in this case—with spine, ribs, belly, and arms. It was alive.

I felt that there, in the cold basement, we had come full circle from the

well-lit but context-free Iatmul housefront in the "Pacific Spirits" exhibit upstairs. The Iatmul house is presented as symbolizing a person, although it too may be one. The Maori house, even left alone, *is* human. We were no longer in the museum or in a house as we knew it. We were in his belly.

But wait. How would a Maori have responded to this? How would someone from Chicago's inner city? Who was talking in the Maori house? Not the house posts this time. The discourse was a contested one, and it points to the effectiveness of irony as a deconstructive device. This device has great potential both for anthropologists and for those on the margins of a Eurocentric world, such as Maori performers of "cultural theater" in museums.

The dramatic authority in the experience we anthropologists shared in the Maori house was Terrell's. He performed "otherness" as if he were a Maori grandmother instead of a white American male, as if this were a New Zealand *marae* instead of a museum basement in the United States. He told us what he was doing. He appropriated the voices and the place to try to make it live for us.

But we, as anthropologists in a privileged space "behind the scenes" at the museum, had power, too. As Pacific specialists we shared the context and the assumptions, or community of belief in a scientific sense, to experience the ironies of the situation. These ironies, like the opportunity to visit the house itself, might well have been inaccessible to other museum visitors. (I can imagine a family from Peoria peeking in the door as we trudged barefooted toward the Maori house in the wake of Terrell's wailing call: "I think it's some kind of cult, Martha.")

Irony holds the potential to deconstruct rather than just exclude if it is used by the people whose places museums have tried to represent. Irony expresses two meanings simultaneously. Whatever their cultural background, people who use irony doubt that things are as commonsensical as they seem. Ironists have doubts about the vocabulary they use to talk about life—their "final vocabulary" in Rorty's sense—doubts that cannot be resolved in Cartesian ways, doubts that encourage juxtaposition.

Since there is nothing beyond vocabularies which serves as a criterion of choice between them, criticism is a matter of looking on this picture and on that, not of comparing both pictures with the original. Nothing can serve as a criticism of a person save another person, or of a culture save another culture—for persons and cultures are, for us, incarnated vocabularies. So our doubts about our characters or our own cultures can be resolved or assuaged only by enlarging our acquaintance. (Rorty 1989, 80)

Irony can be subversive as well as elitist. Anthropologists can help to draw attention to the spaces between contrasting meanings—the meaning of speaking to and about architecture, for example—as Terrell's tour of the Maori house ironically drew attention to the potential of cultural theater. Canadian literary critic Linda Hutcheon finds Victor Turner's idea of liminality to the point here: "Irony opens up new space, literally between opposing meanings, where new things can happen. As poet Claire Harris puts it: 'Liminality, the space between two worlds, is a place of paradox.' It is also a place of irony. And in both cases, this is where the action is" (Hutcheon 1991, 17).

The action here is on two fronts. First, irony in the form of cultural theater could open a door to the museum through which native peoples can enter and critique Western representations while presenting their own, no doubt contested, discourses about themselves and their places. As Hutcheon notes in the context of literature, irony can be an effective deconstructive device because it allows those on the margins "to address a dominant culture from within its own structures of understanding, while still contesting and resisting those structures" (Hutcheon 1991, 31). Here the structure of understanding is the museum and those on the margins of it are, among many others, the various voices of living Maori and living Maori places.

The second front is out there in the anthropological field. Anthropologists can draw attention to and explore concretely the ironic open spaces between worlds by focusing on social landscapes, or local constructions of meaning in and through places. The diverse ways in which Maori, Tahitian, and Iatmul places speak, and are spoken to, are lived meanings that may *contain* but do not necessarily *represent* hidden ones. The empowerment of places anthropologists work in and write about should help raise the voices of the native peoples who are continually constructing these living places.

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## Notes

1 I have conformed to Field Museum's cultural practice of referring to the museum without a definite article (see Terrell 1991a, 149). Throughout this paper, it is Field Museum, not *the* Field Museum.

2 Neither would other men's houses from Papua New Guinea. The only place such a house would fit is in the museum's main hall. Another display in the exhibit shows a model of a men's house placed within a model of this main hall. The display demonstrates that the men's house (280 feet long) would barely fit in the 299-foot-long museum space.

3 Evans-Pritchard's photographs of Nuerland in wet and dry seasons also come to mind. Perhaps we North Americans and Europeans, so used to worlds transformed by snow, find the contrast between worlds of land and water exotic.

4 Graeme Hardie (1980) suggests the usefulness of the term "expressive space" for analysis of the culturally shaped human use of space.

5 See for example Bourdieu 1977; Giddens 1979; Gottdeiner 1985; Harvey 1973, 1985.

6 Ironically, at home in Egypt they were regarded as scholars "trained" by Europeans, but in Stockholm and Paris, out of place, they were exotic objects to be displayed and studied. The Papua New Guinea curator whose visit to Field Museum is discussed in this paper was in a similar position.

7 Canadian museums are experiencing similar pressures. An arts critic wondered if a planned 1992 show on Toronto teen-agers at the Royal Ontario Museum would be any better than some of the museum's other "intellectually worthless ventures such as the 1989 baseball show. . . . [I]n view of the ROM's recent and deplorable tradition of letting the marketing department drive the curatorial end of things, we shouldn't get our hopes up" (Mays 1991).

8 Interestingly, collecting in this way seems to bypass, or at least obscure, issues of ethics and power that keep contemporary anthropologists from collecting for museums while doing fieldwork (cf Price 1989, 75).

9 For example, a rare attempt to introduce irony into a display of African arti-

facts collected by missionaries provoked the wrath of Toronto's black community in a 1989–90 exhibit at the Royal Ontario Museum (Fulford 1991).

10 Other important assumptions I have not gone into here concern gender and anthropological authority. Consider for example Roxana Waterson's critique of the same Kabyle house. She observes that "the authorial voice of the anthropologist largely conceals from us whether he is talking about a model held by Berber men, or his own interpretation of it" (1990, 197).

11 A parallel debate concerns the authenticity of objects displayed. How can curators promote a sense of authenticity (see Crew and Sims 1991)? Does it matter if all the objects in a re-created 1740 inn are replicas in the Canadian Museum of Civilization? It does to many museum people and critics (see Godfrey 1991). But others, who clearly still subscribe to the dichotomy of form and substance, argue that authenticity of appearance matters more than authenticity of substance: "The impression remains genuine and we can take that away with us" (Engfield 1991).

12 "The Spirit Sings," produced by the Glenbow Museum at the time of the Calgary Winter Olympics, was boycotted for its insensitivity to contemporary native issues, notably the plight of the Lubicon Indians' unresolved land dispute and exploitation by Shell Oil.

"Into the Heart of Africa" at the Royal Ontario Museum from November 1989 until August 1990 generated tremendous antagonism, particularly toward its curator. Audiences misconstrued her subtle critique of the missionization process through which the museum acquired most of its African collection. Their interpretation of the exhibit as racist seems to have followed from the museum's marketing of the show as an exhibition of black consciousness.

The Royal Ontario Museum hoped to avoid problems by increasing black involvement in a planned Caribbean exhibit, but relationships between it and the black community remained strained (see Drainie 1991, Taylor 1991).

13 See Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1991, 415–416) for discussion of the complex semiotics of performing culture. Self-representation, as she reminds us, is representation nonetheless. The status of the performers becomes especially problematic as they become signs of themselves. Essentializing and totalizing, then, must be avoided in cultural theater of the sort Terrell advocated as in other live displays.

14 As I left Chicago, the anthropology department was jubilant because \$250,000 had become available to restore the Maori meetinghouse for exhibition.

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## Abstract

The overall objective of this article is to critique approaches to the study of place through consideration of selected museum exhibits. The form of the article is somewhat experimental. It is a narrative journey with three stops along the way. At one level the article is about a visit to the Pacific Halls at Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago, focusing on three exhibits. At another level, reflection on these exhibits is intended to critique the use of the concept of “place” in contemporary anthropology. The concept of “social landscape,” introduced through a discussion of Iatmul (Papua New Guinea) ceremonial houses, is the first stop in this critical tour. Next, a Disneyfied Tahitian marketplace in the museum provides the focus for a critique of the representation of places and a reminder of the political dimensions of evocation. The article concludes with a visit to the basement of the museum where a New Zealand Maori meetinghouse is stored. There I consider irony as a device for conveying other ways of understanding power associated with places, both in museums like Field and in the field of anthropology.